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ABSTRACT

A study examined patterns of English usage in 52 Japanese university freshmen's written compositions, particularly in the use of the subordinating conjunction "because." It was found that students often fragmented sentences when "because" was involved, or used a comma to separate a trailing dependent "because" clause from the independent sentence. The conjunction "when" was found to be used almost as much as "because," but was misused far less. It is suggested that the "because" errors may derive from students' experience in being asked "why" question in conversational English instruction or popular English language reference materials and may not understand the different expectations for oral and written replies. Additional problems identified were excessive use of coordinating conjunctions to start simple sentences and spelling errors apparently associated with Japanese pronunciation of English vocabulary. (MSE)

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Usage of Subordinating Conjunctions by University of Aizu Freshman Students: a pilot study

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Summary

Although Japanese high school graduates study English language for some 800 in-class hours during six years of secondary schooling, their English skills, particularly writing, tend to be error prone. Therefore, when 1994 incoming freshmen were required to write essays during their first English Composition class, the papers of two sections (52 students) were obtained for review to evaluate the usage of subordinating conjunctions and to identify other deficiencies that deserve further study. The review verified previous classroom observations that one subordinating conjunction "because" is often improperly used in the writings of our students. Students often fragment sentences when "because" is involved, or they use a comma to separate a trailing dependent "because" clause from the independent sentence. This paper speculates as to the causes of these problems, but no definite reasons could be identified. Further research is needed to determine the causes of these errors and the means of resolving the problem.

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Introduction

Japanese high school graduates complete six years of English studies. They graduate from high school after studying English during three years of junior high school classes that met for three hours per week and three years of high school classes that met for five hours weekly. Based on a thirty-four week school year, the average high school graduate has invested some 800 class hours on the study of English.

However, discussions with Japanese high school and college English teachers indicate that the emphasis of this education is to prepare the Japanese students to pass college entrance examinations. Developing the students' ability to read short passages and to selectively answer multiple choice questions pertaining to these passages is considered the primary goal of the secondary school English language education program. The learning of common English phrases and the ability to

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write short, simple sentences generally makes up the rest of their English language education. These teachers further claimed that little time is spent on the writing process or the development of paragraph or composition length writings.

These claims are supported by research conducted at the University of Southern California (USC) in the United States in which one hundred essays of twenty-five advanced ESL students were analyzed for accuracy. These twenty-five students were selected in a stratified random sample to represent the five largest foreign language groups at USC: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Spanish. According to the results of the study, the writings of Japanese students were the most flawed. The Japanese students had the lowest accuracy rate (determined by dividing the total number of words in the essays by the total number of errors) for writing in-class (7.8) and at home (12.0). Spanish students had the second lowest accuracy rates both in-class and at home, 14.0 (80% better than the Japanese students) and 15.5 respectively. In addition, Chinese students who also must contend with differences in the native language use of characters in lieu of an alphabet were the median group in the in-class writing phase with a 15.9 rating and the second most accurate on the at home writings with an accuracy rating of 20.7. According to the researcher involved, this poor performance by the Japanese students is even more pronounced given that the Japanese students collectively produced the shortest corpus of papers, and therefore had less opportunity for error. (Kroll, 1990)

The conclusion that can be drawn is that Japanese high school graduates are relatively poor English writers although significant time has been invested in English language education. Therefore, it is necessary that their major weaknesses be identified and effective college level writing programs be developed to expedite their acquisition of writing skills needed for studies and future research activities. To facilitate these efforts, research involving error analysis and deficiency resolution is essential. This research was conducted to initiate efforts in this area.

Moreover, the review and grading of the compositions of two freshman English classes during the 1993 school year identified several writing deficiencies that deserved immediate research. A primary concern involved inappropriate usage of subordinating conjunctions which was a problem for a large number of students. Available materials on previous writing error analysis do not deal with this subject. (Fitikides, 1963; Healton, 1987; Kizuka, 1992; Maki, 1980; Shaw, 1993; Webb, 1991) Therefore, research into this subject was considered to be pertinent.

The purpose of this pilot study is to evaluate the usage of subordinating conjunctions by incoming freshman at the University of Aizu. Essays of fifty-two incoming students were analyzed for this study which concentrates on the evaluation subordinating conjunction usage, and in particular, "because" which was a common problem for the previous year's students in English Composition.

Discussion

In April 1994, the incoming freshmen at the University of Aizu were required to write essays entitled "My High School Years" during their first English Composition class. The essay was assigned to allow the instructors to gain an insight to the students' writing skills. Students in nine English Composition classes completed this assignment during a forty-five minute time frame in their first class meeting. Copies of the essays from two of the nine classes (fifty-two students total) were obtained and utilized for this study. The students' essays varied significantly in length, from 25 words to 195 words, and in complexity. Some students wrote only in simple sentences, and the less sophisticated of these students merely presented a list of sentences rather than an essay or a paragraph. However, a majority of the students developed one or more paragraphs containing a few complex, and an occasional compound, sentence in addition to the predominant simple sentences.

During the review of these essays, the correct and incorrect use of subordinating conjunctions were recorded. (See Chart 1.) It should be noted that thirty-two students used one or more subordinating conjunctions in their compositions. Subordinating conjunctions occurred a total of fifty-one times. In nineteen of these fifty-one usages, there was an error involved.

Chart 1.
Subordinating Conjunction Usage

	Total Use	Errors	Remarks
because	24	10	Because S/V/O.
		7	S/V/O, because ...
when	19	2	
if	3	0	
though	2	0	
others	3	0	
Totals	51	19	

The primary subordinating conjunction used was "because" which appeared twenty-four times. As might be expected, it was also the most misused, 17 times or 71%. The primary error involving "because" was sentence fragmentation as defined by H. R. Fowler (Fowler, 1992) and D. Gorrell (Gorrell, 1994) which occurred on ten occasions, or 42% of the "because" usage. The second most frequent

error also involved the subordinating conjunction "because." This involved the erroneous separation of a dependent clause from the independent main sentence by an unnecessary comma (Brusaw, 1993). This error occurred seven times, or 29% of the "because" use.

"When," the second most frequently used subordinating conjunction, appeared 19 times in the essays. Although it appeared 79% as often as "because," it's rate of misuse was far less. "When" was used incorrectly in sentence fragmentations on two occasions, 11% of the time. Five other subordinating conjunctions (if, though, after, although, and as) appeared a total of eight times without misuse. The combined total subordinating conjunction errors excluding "because" was 2 of 27 uses or 8%. These is significantly less than the 79% error rate of the subordinating conjunction "because," or even its 42% fragmentation error rate.

Examples of the errors discovered during this pilot study are shown in Chart 2. The errors are representative of the three types of "because" errors and the one type of "when" error found during this pilot study.

Chart 2.
Subordinating Conjunction Errors

Student Writing	Error	Reference
Because I like (to) play tennis. I practice tennis very hard.	. used instead of ,	(Brusaw, 1993; Troyka, 1993)
I stopped playing tennis. Because I had to study to enter (a) university.	unneeded .	(Frank, 1993; Salomone, 1994)
But I could study, because I had my friends.	unneeded ,	(Brusaw, 1993; Warriner, 1992)
When I was a young student in high school. I liked to watch basketball games.	. used instead of ,	(Fowler, 1992; McKernan, 1991)

Although the research to date has not attempted to determine the reason for the error rate involved with the subordinating conjunction "because", an apparent contributing factor, and a possible reason for the misuse, is presented for consideration. Students have more than likely been exposed to the use of "because" phrasal replies to "Why' questions during conversational English classes and studies, and they probably have not been properly instructed on the difference between informal conversational replies and the more formal written replies. This may have resulted in the students assuming that the verbal replies were also acceptable written replies.

In addition, popular and reputable English language reference material may have exposed some of the students to similar examples of spoken English replies in the printed form. One such printed example is "*'Why shouldn't I come?' - 'Because you're too busy.*" (Collins, 1987) Another example is "*Why can't I go?*" "*Because you're too young.*" (Longman, 1992) A third example is "Why are you still downstairs? Because I want to watch the late-night film." (Alexander, 1991) Obviously, these written examples without explanations that they are spoken forms and not acceptable in formal writing could result in misunderstanding among the English language learners using the material. However, this is merely speculation, and more detailed research into misuse of the subordinating conjunction "because" is needed to determine the actual cause of this error.

In addition to the problem above, several other areas requiring further research were noted. These include excessive use of coordinating conjunctions to start simple sentences, and spelling errors apparently associated with the Japanese pronunciation of English vocabulary due reliance on *kana* as a learning tool.

Conclusions

The pilot study determined that our freshman students make an excessive number of errors when attempting to write sentences using the subordinating conjunction "because." The primary problem is sentence fragmentation which needs to be corrected as soon as possible. A secondary problem is the placement of an unneeded comma before a dependent "because" clause that follows an independent sentence.

In addition, this study indicates a need for further research into the writing errors of our students and other Japanese English learners. Through such research a better understanding of their weaknesses and the associated causual factors can be obtained. Such research should result in the development of more fruitful and scholarly English language education materials and methods.

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